

## DESCENT

Phillip Medhurst

### FINNESBURG

Brand beat edda,  
doom on doom.

### FETHERHOMA

My sark, so soft, in a trice can shift  
To spears, cloud-white, that scythe above  
The sorry squats of thought-bound men.

The seas wave-wrinkled, plough-furrowed fields  
Frown as I fly on the road of a swan,  
And sing, unheard, like a soul outgone.

### LORE

There comes a time when the past, unthanked,  
Sinks to its death - forgetfulness.  
Gone then the men who fired the throng  
Who thirsted for more of their heady mead.  
Shapers should share their hoarded lore.

Grim is this life without glee in the hall,  
Happy recall, and tales well-turned,  
Which heard, once fired the hearth-warmed floor.  
Then brave deeds sink without a fight.  
Shame on us all when the owl owns night.

### GALAHAD

Behind the grimy concrete and  
Glaucoma'd glass old Pelles groans.  
The stain grows wider from his groin.

## DESCENT

He tries to read the ceiling-cracks.

Once-great Mordrain, downed by strokes,  
Enquires of the upraised Host.  
He knows too well one certainty:  
His days of usefulness are past.

Elsewhere a youth is kneeling at  
A stream, and catches silver to  
His downy lips. By this refreshed,  
He sets out sick-visiting.

## PHOENIX

Her hair, ash-grey, is now dyed red:  
a phoenix risen from the dead.

## SARCOPHAGUS

Seianti Hanunia Tlesana  
Now wants to protest. But the lock of  
Her jaw-bone and loss of her front-teeth  
(As well as her flesh) means that she is  
Unable to speak for herself and  
Is glad to accept this scribe's service.

When still in her prime she foresaw in  
Her wisdom decay would prevail. Thus  
Some clay was amassed, and instructions  
Were given to artists to model  
Her image seductive and buxom,  
All tinted in natural colours.

Thus she was shown forth as a gift to  
The future, that this work of beauty  
Might sound a soft echo of pleasures  
That she brought to men. The fine lady,  
This done, could put up with old age and  
The dribbling of lips that in youth were

Adorned with love's whispers and kisses  
Before her sweet breath became foetid.

## DESCENT

And so her life's shade could endure the  
Denial of sunlight, content that  
Her beauty shone over her coffin,  
Preserved just as she had decided.

But cruel necromancers, the priests of  
Your science, put flesh on the time when  
She did not have beauty, so they could  
Enjoy some cold cerebral pleasure.  
This paltry addition to the sum of  
Man's knowledge has cost her too much. In

The impotence that death has imposed her  
Indignant remonstrance can not be  
Sustained without pity's assistance  
In place of the promptings of love. But  
True praise, she asserts, must derive from  
Erections desired, not from duty.

## ZARDOZ

If immortal, where would be  
Our zest for life?  
Apathy would freeze us all  
To monuments.  
So come, Oblivion, as friend:  
A longed-for harm -  
Pyramidal heavy, light  
As chamber-dust.  
Death eternal grant, O Lord  
Of Sudden Ends.  
Smeared with necroleptic balm  
Your bullets sing.

## SAMSON

Sam found a little knife  
While wand'ring in the ward.  
When nurses tried to truss  
The old man to a chair,  
He cut their knotted tape  
And made good his escape.

## DESCENT

But is he strong enough  
To grab with steady hand  
The starched lapel of Life-  
In-Death's white coat and crash  
That cranium's empty dome?  
That way, he might get home.

## EDEN

Since Adam delved and Eva span  
Man's waywardness has spoiled God's plan.  
Disease and death here level all;  
Our nakedness reveals a Fall.  
Though Christ could make a corpse to eat,  
To feed this child would be a feat.  
Though God could make a bush to speak,  
A dumb child tells us who is weak:  
For it can neither dig nor spin,  
And day by day its limbs grow thin.  
Such is the consequence of sin.

## SCAPEGOAT

Each head, bowed down with several cares  
Is raised to watch the sacrifice  
Proceed to where Jehovah waits  
To host a feast that famishes.  
This flock anticipates a goat  
That stumbles on the precipice.  
We cannot spare our sympathy.  
With it our karma vanishes.

## ANUNCIATION

As swift as eye-of-reason's blink  
Consent, in waiting, parted lips.  
As quick as pulse could leap to beat  
Of wing, her cry let fly to air  
Where word met Word. Thunder unrolled -  
Salvations's sentence in pursuit

## DESCENT

Of spirit's lightning dart to soul  
Pre-hushed. Her heart, inviolate still,  
Now known, knew all. So All the valley  
Filled, and pure Love's river swelled,  
Then brimmed to shed its healing tide on time.

## CONCEPTION

Mary, maid and mother - both -  
Conceives divinity.  
(Fire, we're told, does not consume  
Her pure virginity).

You who tread on holy ground  
Put on simplicity.  
If He is to be born, God needs  
All your complicity.

## EPIPHANY

In inky shadows sages scratched,  
Got drunk on mythic wines.  
Philosophies were sometimes hatched  
From patterns in the signs.

Yet three, drawn on by astral light,  
With minds as clear as day,  
Traversed the sands to catch a sight  
Of Truth in swaddled clay.

## LAZARUS

I curse the day on which my so-called friend,  
Persuaded by my sisters, chose to come  
And bellowed at me in my cosy den  
Where I had slept for days all neatly wrapped  
In perfumed swaddling-bands. For up till then  
My aches and wants and cares were left outside  
My fortress sealed against the world and time.  
But now I am re-born with my old bones.

## DESCENT

Conclusion to my life has all been robbed:  
I must endure the painful swell again.  
Though I am made a sign I now repent  
The impulse of my blood which leapt too quick,  
For peace by any should not be disturbed  
When it by natural means has been conferred.  
When brute creation first brought me to birth,  
I felt no obligation. Flesh and all  
I made of it was mine. But now each breath  
Compounds my debt to an impatient god.

## MATER DOLOROSA

Pains of childbirth, then of dispossession,  
Leaping heart, then steady retrogression  
Was all angelic flutters came to bring.  
Fair salutations had a farewell sting.

And Death's dark angel did not pass my door,  
But slammed the board, demanding more and more.  
My God, you owe this to me: let me see  
Wherefore my child has now forsaken me.

I want to see him rise to tear the veil,  
And borne by angels his kind father hail,  
As his bejewelled banner he unfurls,  
His blood its rubies and my tears its pearls.

## ROOD

A tree is butchered into beams,  
Torn flesh emblematised,  
As Jesse's rod is re-conceived -  
Delivered cruciform.

Adorned with jewels, hung with gold,  
The ark becomes a rood.  
A flotsam of humanity  
Drowns in a sea of blood.

## DESCENT

### PIETA

I bear this weight with dignity,  
For meaning is in symmetry -  
Or so it seemed that way, before  
I lost my elasticity.

I chiselled him - the crucified -  
As handsome then: a slumbering lord,  
And Mary still resplendent in  
Her prime, and poised, and aureoled

In draperies. But now he droops  
As heavy as a corpse will be,  
And she, wrapped up against the cold,  
Just clutches at this clod, her son.

I had to come in person and  
Join in this undertaking, but  
I'm growing old, now don't know  
Where beauty is. And that's the truth.

### ICON

Though man-proportioned, Christos shrinks:  
A God kenotic made.

### DESCENT

My heart goes down to Hell with him,  
Though I must shut my eyes  
To what he sees. I fear the dark,  
But trail with quiet tread  
Lest he looks back,  
And weakening, lets me cling to him.

For he has work to do within  
That senseless void, and I  
Must be a hovering thing and hope  
That he will see the light  
Again, and say  
That unmade, made again, is good.

## DESCENT

### NOLI ME TANGERE

To me it seemed a comforting idea,  
Too welcome, too sublime to be untrue  
That love and meaning could thus rendez-vous:  
Be gazed upon, and touched.

But doubts persist that I imagined Him.  
When He did not appear I then assumed  
A love that God in fact was loath to show  
Unto The Crucified.

Yet can there be conclusion to my grief  
If I can never cling to one who walks  
Within the graveyard of my dreams, with voice  
Unsilenced by his pain?

And does my vision promise me too much?  
Does Christ Himself recoil from ill-placed trust,  
Compelled to say, "Noli me tangere" -  
That flesh can never stay.

### EXODUS

O Christ, thy crown is broke in two pieces:  
Give half to me, O give half to me.

O Christ thy cloak is riven in pieces:  
Give some to me, O give some to me.

And I will mould a smaller crown,  
And patch a cloak for me.

And I shall go down, down,  
Down unto the sea.

And the sea shall part for me.

### EUCCHARIST

*The rich reduced, the poor endowed,  
The weak are raised to thrones of power.  
The good Lord rules while kings are cowed;  
He undermines the tyrant's tower.*



## DESCENT

In tatters, stripped, from field or hedge,  
God calls us to his banquet spread.  
Supersubstantial manna falls,  
Our daily nurture.

*The full are starved, the empty fed,  
The fertile pine, the barren bear.  
He flattens fields, gives landless bread;  
Both weal and woe our God can share.*

I am his wheat. I shall be ground  
By tooth of beast to make fine flour,  
Unleavened bread - to do His will,  
As done in heaven.

## LENT

These first-fruits pledge what is to be  
A growing and a ripening sea.  
His promise raises us from sleep  
And leads us out across the deep.

## FRANCESCO

My verdict is as follows (mark it well):  
Francesco Bernadone is a fool.  
He thinks that he can strip our Mother Church,  
And rob her of her dowry held in store.

If she is to be wed to high-born men,  
We should not treat her grossly as a whore  
Who gives her favours freely, from the heart,  
To all who beat a path up to her door.

Cathedrals are not built with lepers' hands,  
Or chantries by mere gutter-deaths endowed.  
Bejewelled shrines must dazzle tear-filled eyes,  
Not rustic dolls laid out on heaps of straw.

Francesco and his half-crazed crew may stalk  
Unto their hearts' content this countryside,  
But they shall not invade our frescoed walls,  
Or stigmatise the icons we adore.

## DESCENT

We rest secure beneath our mosaiced domes.  
The chant of priest, the tinckle of the coin,  
Ensures the soul's release, the sinner's balm,  
While gospel-truth is safe beneath the floor.

## TERESA

A cherub pressed me to my knees:  
He held a flaming spear.  
He struck again, and then again:  
As much as I could bear.

I soon abandoned all desire  
For this sweet pain to cease.  
No other bliss compares to this

I greet this torment willingly.  
I fondly hug the wound.  
Love's quarry, breathless, flees no more,  
For she is run to ground.

## AQUERO

Within this cave I heard "That Thing"  
Disclosing how our prayers  
Could kindle light, transfiguring  
Those crippled by their cares.

And thus re-made, a sluggish flow  
Could spring to healing spate.  
Old bones Could pave the way to show  
Changed flesh, immaculate.

Beyond the paling moon, the dawn,  
An azure cincture round the earth,  
Revealed to preternatural sight  
How dew will fall to arid earth.

## DESCENT

### APOCRYPHON

Four-times-four centuries out of view,  
First born, then buried, then born anew,  
Seth was my father, Eugnostos my groom,  
Gongessos my midwife, Charaxio my tomb.  
Through six-times-ten summers the dust-cloud of gold  
Released at my re-birth has brightly rolled  
Around the globe - the Nile's gift of reeds  
Kindled by knowledge and sowing light's seeds.  
Though delivered third-hand to your perception,  
I am, nonetheless, the Immaculate Conception.

### THE TESTAMENT OF SOPHIA

Conceived immaculate, I nonetheless  
Desired a thing exclusive to my Self:  
Sophia exercised effective will,  
With freedom to desire as she chose.  
Conceiving Self, therefore, I hatched a scheme  
Within the womb of what I thought was real.

But what I willed was not immaculate:  
It marred the vision I had once enjoyed  
While contemplating true reality.  
He gazed upon the waters of the Deep,  
And when he saw himself he laughed and said,  
"I am 'I am'. There is no God but me."

His mother heard the godling's bombast; so  
From then I knew what kind of thing he was.  
I turned again in sorrow to my source  
And caught a spark which turned to living flame  
Fed by the fuel of love. That fire took shape,  
And all that Matter sought to emulate

Appeared. No eye could but be opened at  
The sight transcending every faculty,  
Whose finger traced in letters of pure light,  
"The One is one. There is no other One.  
Unnamed, beyond all mortal register,  
He is alone, unique, without a peer.

Since he does not subsist in time, He needs  
No life that throbs with temporality,

## DESCENT

Nor does he strive to overcome a lack,  
For He is perfect in His boundless sphere.  
Thus none can know that One except for one  
Proceeding from the One, and that I am."

On meeting Matter then this testament  
Fell to the Deep as incandescent drops  
Towards that space and time where nature's laws  
Are fetters from which none can be exempt;  
Where all must yearn for what there might have been,  
With that eternal "now" beyond their ken.

Yet what descended still remains unquenched,  
Although imprisoned in a tomb of clay:  
We know of our beginning, and our end,  
From whence we came, and whither we must go.  
A mere reflection of His light, I shed  
What light I have, proclaiming all I know.

## IDA

In this, the Sabbath vigil of my life, I found  
Myself prostrate, all helpless on the ground,  
For sin had made me blind. It was as though  
Throughout my life I strayed, and did not know  
Where I was going or from whence I came,  
Just led by some ephemeral, dancing flame  
Snuffed out once it was glimpsed, and dead to sight  
Before it could be fixed – the moth's mad flight  
More full of rhyme and reason than my life,  
Now so replete with grief and full of strife.

I've looked at ev'ry explanation that  
There is of life, and none come near to sat-  
Isfying all criteria of truth,  
Or come up with the necessary proof  
That they're the answer. All require a leap  
Into absurdity – alright for sheep  
Who find their comfort in conformity,  
But useless for all lone-wolves such as me.  
There is a way to make it work, of course,  
Which is: to put on blinkers like a horse

And go just where the drayman tells you to.  
But in your heart you'll know it to be true

## DESCENT

That, even though you're willing to work hard,  
All roads end up inside the knacker's yard.  
"Arbeit macht frei" is true to a degree,  
But not the way we wish that it could be.  
A product of conception, you will be  
From life aborted, however belatedly.  
Meanwhile, you strive where chance gives no reward:  
Your feeble hand upturns an empty gourd.

And so our ends are like a jelly-fish:  
Sans spine, sans brain, a wat'ry upturned dish  
Borne on through vastness we cannot perceive –  
Still less control enough to steer. Believe  
We may, but proof of purpose or a plan  
Revealed consistently denied, we can  
Not fabricate from our own stuff, for we  
Are empty, blind, insensate, falsely free,  
Borne on by tides, by winds, by currents, all  
Uncomprehended, landing where we fall.

The birds seem free; no wonder, then, the dove  
Is symbol of God's Spirit from above.  
But what became of all the other birds  
That Noah released, and of all the herds  
Of beasts not taken to the ark? – They died.  
And that same Spirit, free to tell, denied  
Us details of their wretched fate. So we  
Can go into oblivion. We are free  
To die and be forgotten; the elect  
Disclose God's will to naturally select.

Just like a snail I leave a glistening train  
To be erased by the first fall of rain;  
Or, like the scarab, roll a ball of dung,  
My pyramid for when I have no tongue  
To extol my own deeds. For like that bird,  
(Though it may seem unlikely and absurd)  
The phoenix, from the ashes (I surmise)  
Once fire is spent I presently will rise  
To live again; although we know within  
That in this legend ashes are the "fin".

And yet I hope that soon this week will end,  
That dawn will break, and broken hearts will mend,  
So that a wholesome Sabbath day will bring  
Enlightened rest; that birds again will sing

## DESCENT

Instead of fearsome rustlings in the dark;  
And the whole world will be a pleasant park:  
The wood in which we wandered just a copse,  
A refuge for the timid beast, which hops  
To cover, then comes out at will to see  
The sunlight play, no need at all to flee

From hungry predator. A dream! As such  
It does not heal, but just provides a crutch  
For fractured consciousness, which seeks in vain  
To mend its broken world, where only pain  
Defines reality, and we are lame,  
And cannot run, compete against, or tame  
The ravening beast which seeks us, and devours  
The meagre gleanings of successful hours.  
The dawn will show a good God to be lies,  
And noonday sun expose a Lord of Flies.

I know the time is nigh: the global scale  
Has tipped towards destruction. Soon the tale  
Of all man's deeds and misdeeds will just stop,  
And end in silence. Sin's ripe fruit will drop  
And smash upon the ground of all our being.  
That ground may then remain, all else then fleeing,  
As cold and hard as it has ever been,  
Unheard, unsmelt, untouched and all unseen  
By anything that mars the pristine scape  
Of nothingness with any wanton shape

Irrelevant to Being-in-Itself –  
All life placed on that continental shelf  
Where fossils lay well out of sight and out  
Of mind, mere rocks embedded there to flout  
The law of life which says that we must change,  
And we must use our power to arrange  
Some continuity of gene, no noise  
To rattle or disturb death's equipoise.  
So Ida is our perpetuity,  
Extinct and petrified where none can see.

**DESPAIR**

If I knew what the living of this life  
Obtained, I would obtain it. All that strife,  
Anxiety and hurt would contribute  
To some exchequer full of meaning's loot  
Which, plundered from the stinking hold  
Of death, would help me to pay off, all told,  
Those bitter creditors who lay in wait  
At each day's wakening – not in this state  
Of ignorance, bankrupt, without defence,  
To give up hope without a recompense.

For once I rose, then fell. Again I rose  
And staggered to this path. This one I chose,  
To leave a trail (which will be overgrown within  
Another lifetime) – not that I begin  
Anew: my marks and tracks haphazard fell  
Throughout this forest floor, which scarcely tell  
Of feet that trod this way. For no-one cares.  
Each too in isolation, lost, each fares  
Towards a light too briefly glimpsed, before  
A rush of wind removes what we just saw –  
If not imagined. Then, sometimes, we look  
To see if we can scry within the brook  
From which we drink an image of the stars.  
Instead, the canopy of boughs, like bars,  
Blots out the sky, an ever-growing lid  
Built by our past mistakes – nor can we bid  
It stop. It grows and grows. The image of  
The light which we remember up above  
Gets dimmer as we go. And so our trail  
Bequeaths no thing of value, and we fail  
To teach to those who follow a true way.  
We came. We stopped. We went. We had our say.

And whether night or day, it makes no sense:  
Our toil receives no lasting recompense.  
The arbit'ry division of the days  
As hours, minutes, seconds; and the ways  
In which these segments must be spent; and how  
We should be happy and fulfilled; who bow  
To, who revere; and where we are consigned  
To at our death: all these make chains that bind  
Us. We embrace these shackles, since the free  
Must for themselves define what they must be –

## DESCENT

What "happy" is, and what should make them sad,  
And wherein dwells the good and where the bad.

Night brings no rest unless we lose ourselves  
Inside a dream-world where our psyche delves  
Into those wishes unfulfilled, beyond  
The grasp of nightmare's reach, a pond  
Beneath whose surface deep desire thrives  
Without diminishing our thwarted lives;  
A magic chalice where all beauty lives,  
Which takes from no-one, ever – only gives  
To all, and none must beg: its grace  
Wells up to all, and all can find a place.  
But dawn's cold light reveals it full of lies.  
Best not to dream when we must close our eyes.